

Local news Thursday, January 26, 2006

New road will link Bliss, Biggs to East Side

State commission could OK project today

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AUSTIN -- The Texas Transportation Commission today is set to approve the largest road construction project in El Paso history.

Commissioners will vote on a proposal from road construction company JD Abrams to build a seven-mile "inner loop" connecting Loop 375 on the East Side to U.S. 54 at Fred Wilson Drive.

The project could cost as much as \$200 million, said Transportation Commissioner Ted Houghton, an El Paso businessman.

While city and transportation officials agree the project is essential to help the city to accommodate tens of thousands of new soldiers expected by 2011, debate is already swirling around the possibility of the Inner Loop becoming El Paso's first toll road.

"Hopefully, it's going to make this project happen much sooner than we had expected before," said Chuck Berry, El Paso district engineer for the Texas Department of Transportation.

The plan to connect the two highways with an inner loop has been in the works for at least a decade, but transportation commissioners said the money just wasn't there. Construction alone is expected to cost \$175 million.

The proposal from JD Abrams could make the road a reality in a few years rather than the couple of decades it would take for the state to come up with the money. Using a method called "pass-through" financing, JD Abrams would pay upfront for the design and construction of the road. The state would reimburse the company over a number of years based on the number of cars that travel the road.

Bill Burnett, JD Abrams' vice president of project development, who was the El Paso district engineer for the Transportation Department from 1991 to 1993, said the company submitted the unsolicited bid largely because of the military and associated economic growth expected in El Paso in the coming decade.

By 2011, Fort Bliss expects to receive about 21,000 additional soldiers and about 30,000 family

members.

By 2008, about 300 Boeing contractors are also expected at the post to work on the Future Combat Systems program, which will have an Evaluation Brigade Combat Team at Fort Bliss.

The new stretch of road would open the East Side to development near both Biggs Army Airfield and Fort Bliss.

"The benefit to us would be access from the East Side of town and for soldiers and their families who will be living on Biggs and contractors and families and others that will be living there," said Jean Offutt, Fort Bliss spokeswoman.

The highway would also increase the velocity of trade in the city and across the border, airport Aviation Director Pat Abeln said. The El Paso International Airport has invested about \$60 million over the past several years, creating about 300,000 square feet of air cargo space and 36 acres of aircraft parking, he said.

He said the airport will invest about \$10 million in the new road and has agreed to grant the right of way needed to build it.

"From our standpoint, ... the sooner the better," Abeln said. "We're not trying to meet a projected need in 2015; we're trying to catch up with the 2004 need."

Burnett could not say when JD Abrams would expect to start or complete construction of the road because the company will be competing with others to contract with the state, if the commission approves the project today.

The terms for repayment by the state would be worked out when and if the transportation commission accepts the company's proposal, Burnett said.

If commissioners approve the project today, they must allow at least 45 days for other companies to submit proposals. Burnett said a final decision could come this summer.

But he said unequivocally that JD Abrams' proposal does not include tolls.

"A toll road is probably not acceptable in El Paso to the rank-and-file citizens," Burnett said.

Legislation passed in 2003 allows for the building of roads using a number of financing methods, including the "pass-through" option JD Abrams has proposed, as well as the collection of tolls to repay construction costs.

State Rep. Joe Pickett, D-El Paso, an outspoken Transportation Department critic, said he would support only non-toll plans for the new construction. "That doesn't help in our standing with (the Base Realignment and Closure Commission) to build a new road and then say, 'Oh, by way, we're going to toll the new troops coming in,' " he said.

Transportation Commissioner Houghton said he wants to see competitive proposals that include tolls because they could generate revenue for future El Paso transportation needs after the road is paid for.

"This may be a heck of a toll project," he said.

Transportation officials have estimated El Paso has about \$426 million worth of big projects in the planning stages, and Houghton said it would take some "outside-the-box" thinking to pay the tab. "This is the wild frontier when we're talking about all the opportunities and possibilities out there."

Even if the commission accepts a proposal like JD Abrams' that does not include tolls now, Texas Transportation Commission Chairman Ric Williamson said, the project would be a good candidate to become toll road down the line.

State law allows either the Transportation Department or a city's regional mobility authority to decide to collect tolls on such roads after the state has paid for them.

"It appears to us that any road, any project, that would be financed using this pass-through mechanism is a probable candidate for a toll road at some point in the future," he said.

El Paso is the only major city in Texas that does not have a regional mobility authority, and the city is considering creating one. The authority would have the power to initiate major transportation projects that would be partly paid for by road tolls.

Veronica Callaghan is chairwoman of Mayor John Cook's Transportation Cabinet, which is conducting public hearings to gauge support for the authority.

She said she thinks El Pasoans are ready to consider paying tolls to get around the city faster.

"This community has often gone into deep despair thinking we're victims of the rest of the state ... ," she said. "But we're now convinced we have to use absolutely every tool out there in order to get projects built we need to get built here."

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